Teacher union oral histories necessarily reference many different individuals and organizations, which can make understanding their narratives difficult for those unacquainted with the historical context. To assist in reading for those new to the subject, we have annotated the narrative with hyperlinks and footnotes that can provide quick reference information. In addition, readers may want to consult Jack Schierenbeck's *New York Teacher* series, "Class Struggles: The UFT Story," which covers many of the events discussed in Abe Levine's oral history. Two particularly helpful print publications for understanding these events are Rick Kahlenberg's biography of Al Shanker, *Tough Liberal*, and Dave Selden's memoirs, *The Teacher Rebellion*.

The annotations (hyperlinks and footnotes) in the transcript are the work and responsibility of the interviewer, Leo Casey.

LC: Today is November 5, 2018. My name is Leo Casey (in transcript, LC). I am here to interview Abe Levine (in transcript, AL) who for many, many years was a Vice President for Elementary Schools of the United Federation of Teachers. Abe, I thought you might want to start by just telling us a little bit about your family, especially your parents, any siblings you might have, their influence that they had on you in terms of you eventually becoming involved in the union. Did your parents or grandparents immigrate to the United States? Where did they come from? Were they active union members?

AL: Yes, my parents did immigrate to the United States, but my parents really had no influence over me in terms of my involvement with the union. I am the only person in the family, I would say ... I'm thinking about that right now ... who really was an active union member, who was involved in in terms of joining the union to begin with. That I did in 1951. All of my activities just came from my own desire to be involved with the union.

AL: Now how did that happen? Well, I really don't necessarily know exactly how it happened except that beginning in high school I was very much interested in social studies, in economics. I began to learn about the labor movement in high school. I read many newspapers in those days when I was in high school. There were many newspapers being sold in New York City. I became very, very knowledgeable, very frankly, about social issues, economic issues in high school.

AL: When I became a teacher in 1951, I decided to join the union or the Teachers Guild simply because it was a union, it was affiliated with the A.F. of L. (American Federation of Labor). It was the only organization affiliated with the A.F. of L. that represented teachers, so that's why I joined the Teachers Guild in 1951, only because it was a union.

LC: All right. Did you go to elementary school and high school in New York City?

AL: Yes. I'm strictly a New York City boy, that is strictly from kindergarten right through high school. I did go to NYU in the Heights in the Bronx, which really was basically, I would say, a mistake that I made as a 17-year-old graduate of high school. Because that college basically emphasized science and mathematics, my two weakest subjects. But I struggled through and I graduated in three years, which was not an easy task. I was very happy to graduate.

AL: When I graduated, I then made a decision that I would go to law school. I signed up or enrolled at NYU Law School. In those days NYU Law School immediately accepted you if you were an NYU graduate. No tests, no bureaucracy. Okay. But before I actually paid my fee at NYU Law School, suddenly, I don't know what happened, but I decided to not become a lawyer and to turn to education. Then I signed up at the NYU School of Education.

AL: They had a special program for graduates of colleges where we had no educational background. I had absolutely no educational background in terms of education, in terms of teaching. That program was a two-year program at NYU School of Education. I had to go through a personal interview. I forgot her name who was the dean of that school who happened to be, I learned in later years, that she was a very close friend of John Dewey. Sure enough, during that two-year experience that I had at NYU School of Education, it was strictly in progressive education, 1949 through 1951. Now, of course, when I became a teacher and tried to apply progressive education, it didn't work.

LC: Let me ask you a few questions. You lived in the Bronx?

AL: I lived in Brooklyn.

LC: In Brooklyn? You went all the way up to the Bronx for college.

AL: Yeah, I went all the way up to the Heights, that is correct. One and a half hours by subway, one way. That is correct. Yes.

LC: What high school did you go to?

AL: I went to New Utrecht High School.

LC: Okay. When you were in college, what subject did you major in?

AL: Well, it was a problem because as I've just said, this was NYU at the Heights, and now it's disappeared. But they stress science and mathematics. I had to take science courses and mathematics courses, but they were my weakest subjects. What I did, which was rather thinking smart on my part ... I didn't really know why I was that smart at that particular point ... I decided to take some subjects at NYU Downtown where there were other courses, especially in social sciences and economics, my strongest subjects. They allowed me to do so.

AL: Instead of graduating with a Bachelor of Arts, a BA, I graduated with a BS, a Bachelor of Science. I never really understood the distinction until many, many years later between the BA and BS. But the BS was because I took some courses at NYU Downtown in the social sciences, economics, my strongest subjects. It was accepted uptown at NYU, and I graduated after three years in college.

LC: Were there any professors in college or graduate school that particularly influenced you?

AL: The answer is no. I was basically influenced by what I read. I've always been a terrific newspaper reader. Unfortunately, now as I'm going blind, I'm losing my eyesight, one of the hardest things that I am facing is I can't read the print in *The Times*. I feel so frustrated about that. Basically, I learned by myself by reading newspapers and listening to news reports on radio. I was very big radio fan when it came to news reports, and that was a big thing on radio. I

basically just learned a lot, I must say, strictly by myself because there really was no one else basically to teach me.

LC: When you became a public school teacher, did you make a conscious decision that you wanted to be an elementary school teacher? Because it's obviously an unusual thing, particularly in those days, for a man to become an elementary school teacher. Or was it just something that took place by happenstance?

AL: Well, I went to the Board of Education just to get information about positions in the New York City Public School System. I told the person that I wanted to be a high school teacher of social science, social studies because that really was my strength and has remained my strength throughout all of my entire life basically, my entire career.

AL: That person said, "Look," he or she said, "there are no positions right now." This is 1949 that I first went to the Board of Ed to seek a position. "There are no positions in the high school," is what this person told me at the Board of Education personnel department. "But there will be positions in the elementary school." I said, "Well, why is that so?" "Well, the veterans coming back," this person said, "are beginning to have children, and their children will be going to the elementary school. There'll be positions in the elementary school. You're going to have to wait until these kids get a little old before they go into high school, so my advice," this person said, "is to become an elementary school teacher." That's how I became an elementary school teacher as opposed to a high school teacher.

LC: What school did they assign you to?

AL: My first school was ... Well, I served as a substitute at PS 166, PS 105, but I was assigned to PS 105 and then that became PS 145. These are schools on the West Side of Manhattan.

LC: You said that you became a member of The Guild. You certainly know at that time there was also the Teachers' Union, which was a union that had influenced very strongly by the Communist Party. Did you make the conscious

choice between them? Or did you just know about The Guild, and so you decided that The Guild was the union?

AL: Well, I decided that The Guild was an A.F. of L. union, which I was very much interested in. As I have said, I became rather knowledgeable about unionism starting in high school. The Guild was affiliated with the A.F. of L. and whereas the Teachers' Union was not. I began to learn a little bit about the Teachers' Union just by reading that it was under Communist influence, Communist control, whatever word you want to use. That is why I decided to join The Teachers Guild because it was an A.F. of L. union, and that was my main concern.

LC: As soon as you became a teacher, you signed up in The Guild. Did you organize The Guild in the School that you were in?

AL: I tried very much to do so, but it was very, very difficult because teachers did not want to even listen, to be involved in unionism. They just didn't even want to have any discussion about it. It was very, very difficult to get people even interested in being interested in just listening. That was a very, very difficult task.

AL: But, however, on the West Side of Manhattan where I was teaching, there were people who became teachers who were interested in unionism. I found that in my schools, PS 105, PS 145, that there was a group of teachers who were interested in unionism. They may have had some background and families and so on, and they then became members of The Teachers Guild.

LC: I think a lot of New York City teachers who became involved in unions, and certainly like the case with Al Shanker himself, they were children of parents who had been in the unions in the needle trades, so in Garment Workers' Union or something like that. When you became a member of The Guild, there were all of these what were then sort of older leaders of the Guild like Charlie Cogen, Abe Lefkowitz, Jules Kolodny. There's Alice Marsh.

AL: Dave Wittes is to be included.

LC: Yes, Dave Wittes, Lena Tulchin, Fanny Simon and Layle Lane. Do you want to say just a little bit about your experience with these people?

AL: Yes. Those people that you mentioned did have a great deal of influence over me, because I became the Chairperson of the Elementary School Committee of The Teachers Guild around 1955. I got a phone call from Dave Selden. Dave Selden was the only full-time organizer of The Teachers Guild until 1959 when Al Shanker also became an organizer of The Teachers Guild.

AL: Dave Selden got to know me, and I got to know Dave when I was the Chairman of the Elementary School Committee of The Teachers Guild. Being a member, being the Chairperson of that committee, I got a phone call one night from Reuben Mitchell whose name you did not mention. But Reuben Mitchell also was one of our very great leaders. He said, "Abe," he said, "Charlie Cogen told me to call you to ask if you want to be on our Executive Board." I said, "Reuben," or Rube as we called him, I said, "I'm not qualified to be on the Executive Board of The Teachers Guild."

AL: This has been something about me, which you may not even be aware of, Leo. I hope you don't mind me saying this. I always put myself second, so to speak. I always seem to say, "I'm not the one. I'm not the one qualified." That's what I told Reuben Mitchell. He said, "Abe," he said, "Look, we are aware of that, but Charlie wants young people on the Executive Board of The Teachers Guild." Finally, he convinced me and I finally said yes.

AL: I became a member of the Executive Board of The Teachers Guild around the mid-1950s. On The Guild Executive Board, I paid attention. I listened. I'll tell you, I learned a great deal just by listening. In those days, the members of The Guild, those that you mentioned and others, were truly great speakers. They were truly great speakers. They were very, very knowledgeable individuals. Just to listen to them speak was something. I would listen to all of them speak, and I learned a great deal from all of them.

AL: Now one person who stood out outstandingly was a man by the name of Albert Shanker. I listened to Al, and here is something that I like to mention. I would hear Al Shanker speak. Now toward the end of the 1950s, when we were discussing merging ... We'll come to that I'm sure ... in terms of merging

with another organization, I as the Chairman of the Elementary School Committee got a lot of hell from the members because I was in favor of the merger to form a new organization. On the Committee they were absolutely opposed, and we could talk about that if you wish.

AL: As a Chairman of the Elementary Schools, they would not listen to me. In fact, they wanted me to just go away. They said, "We will decide who our Chairperson is. We don't want you." Well, I told them that under the policy of The Teachers Guild, the President decides who the chairpersons of committees are. You must go to Charlie Cogen." I told them, "Don't come to me if you want a new chairperson." I tried to think about what to do. I was in favor of the merger, and the Elementary School Committee was up in arms, screaming and yelling against a merger, and they wanted me out of being their chairperson. The person I selected to help me was Albert Shanker.

AL: The reason why I chose Al to help me was because I heard him at the Executive Board meetings. I heard him speak. I could have chosen others. Others were terrific people, too, as well were knowledgeable. But I chose Al. Al immediately agreed to help me. Al agreed to attend meetings of the Elementary School Committee. Al being a junior high school teacher, he agreed. On the basis of the fact that he listened to them speak as to why they were opposed to a merger, he then came up with what he felt would be a solution, which eventually was a solution. Al then pursued it with people in the other group, the CATU, Committee for Action through Unity, the group we were going to merge with.

AL: Al made a proposal to them, which they finally accepted without going into all those details, which happened to be very interesting by the way, which very, very few people are aware of all these details as to how Al Shanker helped bring about the merger by doing various things… but also by being involved in trying to get the Elementary School Committee to accept merger. I chose Al Shanker because I used to hear him at the Executive Board meetings, and the way he spoke and so on had a great influence over me going back to the 1950s.

LC: Thanks. This is very important. There had been this historical tension between high school teachers and elementary school teachers in which high school

teachers have been paid more. The issue was how do you have a union in which both the high school teachers and the elementary school teachers can live with each other? You might want to say more about this. But I think the solution that came up with was to create a single salary schedule, but to create a differential for master's degrees and additional credits, so it was no longer you got more pay because you were a high school teacher. You would get more pay if you had these additional educational credentials.

AL: Well, Leo, what you say is absolutely correct, but there's so much more to it than that, Leo. I'll just try very briefly to explain.

AL: Now Al came to listen to the Elementary School Teachers Committee and their opposition to the merger. Now the high school teachers, CATU, Committee for Action Through Unity with Roger Parente and Sam Hochberg their leaders. They came up with the idea of the promotional differential. That's what it was called. That they said would be a $1,000 differential once we would get some power, be able to have collective bargaining and be able to negotiate a contract with the Board of Education.

AL: The elementary school teachers heard about this in the late 1950s. They heard about what was happening in terms of these merger negotiations and the promotional differential. Now at that time the elementary school teachers only needed a bachelor's degree to become teachers. In addition, we had elementary school teachers in those days who did not even have a bachelor's degree. They were training school graduates. They had two years of training school.

LC: It would be like a community college degree?

AL: No.

LC: Not even that?

AL: No. Two years of training school, which did not lead to any degree. It was strictly training in education, to be a teacher. We had some of those teachers around in those days. They, of course, went back to the 1930s, the 1920s maybe. I do remember some of those teachers by the way, because they

were very, very strongly opposed to any merger. They were very vocal about that. I could understand them. I could understand that.

AL: The promotional differential, which Roger Parente and Sam Hochberg and the CATU proposed, was based on a master's degree, which elementary school teachers did not qualify for, did not need. Almost 36 credits in a subject area. Now when the elementary school teachers heard this, that completely left them out of the promotional differential, which was being said would result in a $1,000 differential. That's all they had to hear, because $1,000 in those days was a lot of money.

LC: $100 was a lot of money in those days.

AL: Right? Even today, to me it's still a lot of money. Okay. You can imagine the uproar. That's when I brought in Al Shanker. Now Al Shanker's solution was that, yes, we would still insist on a master's degree. But that elementary education would be considered to be a specialized area requiring the 36 credits in a specialized area for the promotional differential. It wouldn't just be math or science or art. It would not have to be in a subject area, which was how high schools were organized. It could be in elementary education. That was Al Shanker's idea.

AL: Al Shanker then proposed that idea to Roger Parente, one of the leaders of this CATU, Committee for Action Through Unity. Roger Parente said that he would be opposed to any change in their proposal for promotional differential. The master's degree, the 36 credits in a specialized area, he would be opposed to it. Al said what the elementary school teachers are proposing is that elementary education be considered to be a specialized area, because they are not required to have any other specialized areas the way the high school teachers are required to have.

AL: Roger Parente still insisted he was opposed to it. This is what Al Shanker told me afterward. He said he told Roger Parente that unless CATU agreed to allow elementary school teachers to qualify for the promotional differential based, yes, with a master's degree but also to have these specialized areas in elementary education. Unless Roger Parente and CATU agreed, that then there would be no merger. That's what Al told me afterward. Roger still raised

objections. Finally, he agreed. We have to give a lot of credit in this situation to Albert Shanker seeing to it that there is a UFT today aside from everything else that Al did over the years.

LC: That is an important piece of history that I think a lot of people don't understand. I thank you for going into the detail of that because that's important. That merger did go through. Out of that merger was formed the United Federation of Teachers. You became UFT Vice President for Elementary Schools? I suppose having been the head of the Elementary Committee, it was a natural sort of transition?

AL: Except, Leo, as I said before, I always say, "I'm not qualified." I'm going back now to the Chairman of the Elementary School Committee where I felt I was not qualified to become chairman. I said someone else should be the chairman. I was told that person has declined, so, yes, I'm just saying that I became Chairman of the Elementary School Committee as a second choice, not as a first choice, because the first choice declined. He then became a principal of an elementary school. That's how I became Chairman of the Elementary School Committee, just by me being the second choice.

LC: Shortly after the UFT is formed, the union begins a major campaign to win collective bargaining. Right?

AL: Well, a major campaign, yes, I would say yes to that. Yes. But you have to go back, I would say, to the 1950s to when we discussed among ourselves, many of us, sort of on a Friday night informally, the idea of collective bargaining, the idea of strike. I think if I go back to the 1950s, I think it was Dave Selden ... speaking about the late 1950s and informal discussions that we had Friday night amongst ourselves ... who said that we will not become a union unless we have collective bargaining and go out on strike. We did discuss at that point the idea of collective bargaining and going out on strike.

AL: The UFT being established on March 16, 1960. We were thinking about, yes, collective bargaining as a major issue for us. Yes. At that particular point, we began to prepare to see to it that we could gain collective bargaining. Now in those days, no teacher union ... no teacher organization I should say ... in the

United States had collective bargaining. That was a completely new idea among teachers in this country, the idea of collective bargaining.

AL: But we did come up with that idea. As I said, we had some discussion even back in the 1950s. I want to make this as an important point, because we thought that collective bargaining would give us dignity. All along we were trying to see to it that we had dignity as teachers, the idea that we joined the union. We felt the idea of dignity was what we really wanted. We thought that collective bargaining would give us that dignity, which we did not have as teachers in the New York City Public School System. Again, no group of teachers in the country had collective bargaining.

AL: We did decide that would be the issue without any question. Dignity was our desire as teachers, not so much these other issues. It was just salary was always important. We would never negate salary or other work or working conditions and so on. But I just want to say that that our focus certainly in those days was on this idea of dignity as teachers, which we felt we did not have in terms of the bureaucracy of the New York City Public School System where we felt we had absolutely no voice whatsoever in deciding any issue which pertained to teachers.

AL: In fact, the Superintendent of Schools, John Theobald at that time, would give teacher organizations 10 minutes each to meet. When it came for the Board of Education to come up with their budget, John Theobald as the Superintendent of Schools would give each organization ... In those days we had over 100 different teacher organizations in the New York City Public School System ... 10 minutes to sit down with him and other members of the Board of Education to give their concerns in terms of a budget. Well, what's their salary goals and so on. 10 minutes, that's all he would give to each of these regardless of their size of membership and so on. That's the way the Board of Education acted. That's the kind of bureaucracy that we faced.

LC: You mentioned Dave Selden. I think another person who was important with him, which he often gets left out of the history book, because unfortunately he died very young, is Ely Trachtenberg. Ely Trachtenberg had been a member of the autoworkers union, and Dave Selden was very familiar with the autoworkers because he came out of the Detroit area. For them, the

autoworkers were like, "That's a real union, and so if we want to become a real union, we need to organize like they do."

AL: Well, I'm glad you mentioned that Leo, that you mentioned Ely Trachtenberg, because unfortunately he died in 1959 before we achieved collective bargaining. But he was a great inspiration for all of us when he became active with the Teachers Guild in the 1950s. He certainly was one who did speak in terms of collective bargaining, the idea of strike and so on. Yes, he was, and, in fact, I've written something about Ely Trachtenberg by the way, as I remember him very, very well. Yes, he was a very, very inspirational voice in terms of the ideas that we had at that particular time. Yes.

LC: At a certain point, there is debate within the UFT about whether or not to go on strike to win collective bargaining. Can you talk a little bit about that debate? Obviously, you were one of the people in favor of going on strike, but this was a big development for teachers. There were many who thought that teachers shouldn't go on strike.

AL: Yes, there were many who thought teachers should not go out on strike because that would not be professional. That that would be doing something that was unprofessional, but there was something else involved. That was the Condon-Wadlin Act. The Condon-Wadlin Act said that any public employee, including teachers, who went out on strike would be automatically fired. In fact, John Theobald, the Superintendent of Schools, before our strike on November 7, 1960, on that evening before, went on radio, and he made it very, very clear. He said, "There's a Condon-Wadlin law. If you go out on strike, you'll be automatically fired, no ifs, ands or buts about it. That's what's the law, and I will implement the law." That's what John Theobald said.

AL: The idea of The Condon-Wadlin also did frighten teachers, which was understandable, because it meant you would be automatically fired. I remember some of these teachers, Leo, by the way, I remember them so well, who had families, who had children. They were the sole breadwinners in their family. They were so in conflict. One teacher told me he was so in conflict that he got up in the middle of the night before the strike. He got dressed. He then went outside. He walked around the block, he said, to think about what is it that he should do that morning, whether to go out on strike or not. He was

the sole breadwinner in his family. He finally did say he did decide to go out on strike. This was the story he told me after the strike.

AL: There were teachers, yes, who felt that going out on strike was unprofessional. Yes, there were those teachers. But then The Condon-Wadlin did have an effect on some teachers because it was so automatic. That's what John Theobald said, "You'll be automatically fired," and there was no recourse to that. We were faced with that kind of a situation. Also, this was our first strike. This was the first strike of teachers for collective bargaining in this country. It was such a brand new idea. It's hard sometimes for people to accept what is something that is brand new. What's going to happen and so on. Finally, we did get enough members out on strike to see to it that that strike was a successful one.

LC: There were people even in the union leadership like Si Beagle and Dave Wittes, Rueben Mitchell, who had decades of work in the New York City Public Schools who could have lost their pensions.

AL: Well, I'm glad you mention that, Leo. I'm glad you mentioned that, because that's something that is just hardly ever said. I've thought about it many times, the credit that's due to those people. For me it was no problem. I was a young teacher. I was not a breadwinner. It was no problem for me to go out on strike. I would never, ever say that it was problem for me. It was no problem. But for the old-timers in the union who did have a pension coming to them, and under the law, as you said correctly so ... Thank you for mentioning that ... that they would automatically lose their pension. That was a great sacrifice that they would be making. To those people we have to give a tremendous amount of credit, so much more so, I believe, the young fellows, the young women like me who really had, very frankly, very, very little to lose. That's the way I see it.

LC: Do you want to talk a little bit about how the strike was organized and what role did you have in organizing the strike?

AL: Well, the person who really put the strike together and he deserves all the credit in the world is George Altomare. George was fantastic in seeing to it that we had strikers around the schools. To see to it that the schools would be

covered with strikers. Remember in those days there were no computers. It was paper and pencil that George had to work with. He had little cards. I forgot what they were called…

LC: Delaney cards.

AL: Thank you so much, Delaney cards. I was not a high school teacher, so a Delaney card was strange to me. But George used the Delaney cards to keep track of where the strikers would be assigned, what schools and so on. That was a monumental task that George, and he did it very, very brilliantly. George made assignments. George assigned me. I was a West Side teacher. George assigned me to be in charge, so to speak, of the Upper West Side in terms of preparing for the strike.

AL: So what did I do? Well, I knew that I had to get the chapter leaders or others who would be interested in working with us teachers together before the strike and making preparations. But where do we meet? It so happens that at PS 165, Ray Frankel was a chapter leader. Ray Frankel is a terrific unionist. Our principal, Ed Gottlieb, who was very pro-union, Ray went to Ed Gottlieb, and Ed Gottlieb permitted us to meet after three o'clock to prepare for the strike in the teachers' lunchroom.

AL: I got in contact with the chapter leaders and others who would be interested in helping put together the strike on the West Side. We got together at PS 165 at 107th Street or 109th Street off Broadway in the teachers' lunchroom to plan for the strike. Then others did likewise throughout the city. That's how we planned the strike. But it was George Altomare and his brilliant way in which he put together the strike to see to it that there would be strikers at the schools, which schools had to be covered with strikers, that really made the strike, I would say, very successful.

LC: People don't understand, I think, because these days there are no principals or assistant principals in the UFT. They have their own union. But if you go back in history to the '30s, that many union leaders were actually also principals or assistant principals. Ed Gottlieb was a member of The Guild and even before The Guild, and split between The Guild and the Teachers' Union, he was a member of the Teachers' Union. He has an important history. In the

1960s strike, for all the reasons that you say, it took some courage for people to actually strike and go out. The numbers were relatively small compared to later strikes. Why do you think, after having made all of these threats, that Theobald didn't just fire everybody?

AL: Well, we went out on strike November 7, 1960. It is true that a relatively small number... George Altomare tells me the number out on strike he believes was around 7,500, and George was keeping records. I go by what George says. You have 50,000 teachers in New York City Public School System at that point. It was a relatively small number.

AL: Now the strike occurred. We gathered after the strike. There was no communication the way we have today. We wondered how the strike was going in different parts of the city. The only communication we had was by listening to the radio. We listened to reports of the radio about schools being open and schools being closed and so forth. At my school we were very, very successful by the way. We had a very significant number of teachers out on strike. After the strike, we then assembled at the hall on 66th Street on Columbus Avenue. Now it's the ABC Studios. It seated about 4,000 people. It was a very large boxing arena, the St. Nicholas Arena at 66th Street and Columbus Avenue. We were seated there. I came rather early because I was a West-Sider, and it was just close to where I taught. I came early with a small group of teachers who were willing to come to the meeting, the rally, with me. Others said, "Abe, we got to go home. We got to take care of children." I said, "Okay, fine."

AL: I was sitting there as I recall, and it was rather empty in the hall, and I was concerned. But gradually strikers began to come into the hall, each one carrying a homemade strike sign. We did not have printed signs, which I really hate, which I really dislike, in those days. They were all handmade. Gradually the hall began to fill up, which really was we all breathe a sigh of relief. We were listening to radio. We had portable radios in those days. We listened to radio.

AL: Now as a member of the Executive Board, I was then called to a meeting at the Empire Hotel a block away for a meeting with the Executive Board and officers and, of course, Charlie Cogen, our President. We then had that

meeting at the Empire Hotel. Charlie assigned Iz (Israel) Kugler, who was a college teacher and a member of the Executive Board, to be in charge of the groups that are coming into the boxing arena. Now we were then to debate what to do next. That was the purpose of going to the Empire Hotel to meet the Executive Board and officers.

AL: Well, Charlie Cogen soon got a phone call from Iz Kugler. Iz Kugler was saying, "People were getting restless." They kept on yelling: "Strike! Strike! Strike! Strike! Strike!" Iz said, "The people are getting restless. Please come back as quickly as possible." He then was trying to be the chairperson there of this huge crowd. Now it's about 4,000 seated there coming off a strike, waving their hand made signs and yelling "Strike!"

AL: We on the Executive Board discussed what to do next and we decided what to do when we returned to the arena. Charlie Cogen took the microphone. This was Charlie Cogen's finest hour. Seated before him were 4,000 striking teachers yelling "Strike!" Charlie Cogen first told them that we had a very successful strike. He congratulated everyone on having a successful strike. We closed schools. Other schools, we crippled. We did something that has never been done before. That's how Charlie Cogen began.

AL: After he was able to get some sort of order from the screaming and the yelling "Strike!", Charlie Cogen then said, "I heard from Mayor Wagner while we were at our meeting at the hotel. Mayor Wagner proposed to us that we settle the strike on the basis of the appointment of three," I think it was three, "outstanding labor leaders in the City of New York who will decide on whether or not teachers should have collective bargaining." It will be those three labor leaders," which he included (the President of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Jacob) Potofsky, (the President of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union David) Dubinsky, and another one.

LC: (President of the New York City Central Labor Council Harry) Van Arsdale?

AL: Was it Van Arsdale?

LC: I believe so.

AL: So it was Van Arsdale. Charlie then said that the Executive Board and officers considered the proposal of Mayor Wagner that these three outstanding labor leaders would make a decision. It would be their decision to whether or not teachers would have collective bargaining. Charlie then told the strikers that the Executive Board was recommending that we stop the strike and we accept the Mayor's proposal. Then he went on to say, "In case nothing works out to our satisfaction, we could always go out on strike again."

AL: Still, the strikers, they were yelling "Strike!" Many of them did not know of these three labor leaders. We on the Executive Board knew them because we were so close to the labor movement. But it began to sink in.

LC: Why would the three top labor leaders in the city not support collective bargaining?

AL: Right, right. But it took a while to sink in because they were not known to teachers, some of them. Also, the atmosphere in that hall, the 4,000 or so yelling "Strike!", holding up their picket signs, their homemade picket signs. They were ready to go out on strike forever. Forever if that's what it required, no ifs, ands or buts. They were out to go. They were ready, and they want to go again, to continue to day two. But Charlie finally convinced them that this would be an idea that we should accept, that the Executive Board is recommending it. The officers are recommending it. Finally, when the vote was taken, they finally did accept.

AL: But, as I have said, this was Charlie Cogen's finest hour. Because to face those strikers coming off picket lines where they were told by John Theobald they would be automatically fired if they went out on strike. Their belief was that they had a successful strike. They did something never before done by teachers across this country let alone in the city. To get them finally to understand that Mayor Wagner's proposal was basically in their favor ... a face-saver for the Mayor... was such a difficult kind of thing to do. But Charlie did it. That to me was his finest hour.

LC: Of course, the three labor leaders recommended collective bargaining. There was an election, and the UFT won.

AL: Well, it was not that simple, Leo. The three labor leaders recommended two votes. The first vote would be: Do you want collective bargaining or not? Overwhelmingly, all teachers would vote, not just those on strike. All 50,000 would have the right to vote whether or not you wanted collective bargaining. Overwhelmingly, they voted yes.

AL: That was easy. Now came the hard part, the very hard part. That was: Which organization do you want to be your collective bargaining agent? The UFT, the Teachers' Union, or the CBO, the Collective Bargaining Organization, which was formed by the NEA. The NEA put together for this purpose a lot of those organizations that existed, like the High School Teachers Association, the Elementary School Teachers Association, the Queensboro teachers, the Brooklyn teachers. The NEA put them all together and they called it the CBO, the Collective Bargaining Organization. They were on the ballot. Now there was a question of getting teachers to vote on which organization you want to be your collective bargaining agent.

AL: Well, and this is something which is just not known, Leo. This is not known except maybe to a few of us who are still living. The AFT had sent in an organizer by the name of Henry Clark, a heavyset fellow, to help us in the collective bargaining campaign. The first words out of Henry's mouth was, "You must call every single teacher to get them to vote for the UFT." We said, "Henry, there are 50,000 teachers." Henry had originally come from the private sector, an AFL-CIO organizer. We said, "And that's not possible. We can't call 50,000 teachers." "Well," he said, "it has to be done, otherwise we may not be able to win this election."

AL: We said among ourselves, "We'll go to the Board of Education to get the list." We went to the Board of Education. The Board of Education said, "We have no list. Our list is inaccurate. A lot of information is missing. We can't give you the list. There's no list to give you." Well, what were we to do? We accepted what the Board of Ed said. Again, everything was done on paper and pencil, so there was no list that they could give us. Now what were we to do?

AL: Well, we asked our chapter leaders to gather information, but we didn't have chapter leaders at every school. We had some teachers who would help us, yes, who were not chapter leaders. We asked them to bring back information

to us, the names and phone numbers of teachers so we can phone them. That was Henry's idea, which turned out to be a brilliant idea. We would get the list at the UFT office, Two East 23rd Street, where our office was. We would see names but no phone number for many of them. We said, "Why no phone number?" Well, we found out that teachers would not give us their phone number. They said, "This was private information we can't give you." They told their chapter leaders, "This is private information. We can't give you our phone number."

AL: We got names. We got some phone numbers. We had to make phone calls, which, again, was a terrific idea. Because those phone calls were personal phone calls. "How did you get my number?" Well, how did we get their number? Well, someone said that you should go to the public library to get the information of names and phone numbers. To the public library, yes. The public library we were told has the names and the phone numbers of every teacher in the public school system, so that's what we did. We sent people to the public library to get names and phone numbers.

AL: Well, that was a huge task. But, fortunately, one of our members, Sy Solomon, a chapter leader at Taft High School, was a photographer. He always carried with him his camera. Of course, he did private work. He also took photos of rallies and so on. We sent him to take pictures of the names listed in the public library. With those lists that he provided the photographs, brought back to our office. We then distributed those photos for people to make those phone calls. Some took them home to make phone calls at home because they could not stay at the office and make those phone calls. That was one way that we were able to get phone numbers. Otherwise, we just could not get phone numbers.

AL: I just want to point out something. The Teachers Guild was formed in 1935. The UFT was formed out of a merger of the Teachers Guild and CATU. The Teachers Guild, for many years, every Friday from four to six o'clock would just have open house. By open house they meant that any teacher ... You don't have to be a member ... free of charge can come into our office, and if you have a problem with the school system, with the Board of Ed, we will help you with that problem. That went on for years.

AL: Under Ben Mazen, who was the chairman of that committee, there was a committee of teachers who would sit down from four to six every Friday and listen to teachers coming into The Teachers Guild office with their problem. They lost preparation periods, or whatever it was. My principal is harassing me. What do I do? That sort of thing. Some were very, very serious because Ben Mazen would take legal action to help the teachers. Well, of course, there were no grievances in those days. Ben Mazen would go to the Board of Ed if the teacher gave permission. Or he would go to the State Department of Education in Albany to file a lawsuit. I want to give the late Ben Mazen a tremendous amount of credit, which he did all on a volunteer basis. No one was paid. No one was paid. All this volunteer work during all those years, no one was paid. So, teachers, when we call teachers, Leo, a teacher would say, "Oh, yes. I went to The Guild. I got some help from The Guild. I remember The Guild. Yes, I'll vote for the UFT because The Guild is involved in the formation of the UFT." Or, "This teacher at my school told me that she went to The Guild to get help on a Friday afternoon because the principal was giving her letters, and she didn't know what to do about those letters."

AL: We got the teachers on the phone who would say things like that because of the history of The Teachers Guild, which they remembered in such a positive way as being so helpful to them. Not just in the way in which I described, but in other ways. That was such an important aspect of those phone calls that we made. Teachers knowing that the merger involved The Teachers Guild. The history of The Teachers Guild was so positive in the minds of teachers that that certainly helped us win that election.

LC: I'm going to thank you, Abe, and end the interview here. I'm sure that the information that you have shared with us around how the UFT came to be and the strike for collective bargaining rights and union recognition, I'm sure that that will be very useful for people to be able to read and review. Thank you, Abe.

AL: Well, thank you very much. Thank you.